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ABSTRACT

Two theoretical areas that lend themselves to study as they relate to supervisor-worker relations are locus of control and attribution theory. This study examined two general problems: (1) how a supervisor behaves toward an employee in relation to how that employee performs in the work place; and (2) how a supervisor's locus of control influences the supervisor's behavior toward an employee. Adult college students (N=160) were classified as having internal or external locus of control based on their responses to the Rotter Internal-External Locus of Control Scale. Subjects responded to a written simulation containing information about four employees who differed significantly in how they performed their jobs. For each case study, respondents rated luck, ability, effort, and task difficulty, and indicated future expectancy of employee success on similar task, increased performance, and amount of reward. The findings indicated that a supervisor's locus of control did not significantly influence his behavior toward an employee. Findings supported the view that a supervisor's behavior will vary toward an employee according to how an employee performs in the work place. An employee who demonstrated high performance and high effort expenditure was rewarded more than an employee who exhibited high performance and low effort expenditure. A high performing, high effort expenditure employee was expected to have future success at another task of the same kind, as well as increased performance on future assigments. (44 references) (NB)

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The Effect of Supervisor's Locus of Control and Employee Behavior on Supervisor Attributions

by

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Purpose and Statement of the Problem

A great deal of research has been conducted in the past few years in the area of supervisor behavior in the work place. How supervisors behave toward their employees, as well as the pressures upper management places on first and second level supervisors, often plays a major role in determining how productive a worker will be in a particular organization. Because of the concern about the decline in productivity in the United States, supervisor-worker relations have developed into a major area of study among organizational and behavioral theorists. Two theoretical areas that lent themselves to study as they related to supervisor-worker relations were: locus of control and attribution theory.

The principles and theories related to these areas are most often associated with the research of Fritz Heider, Julian Rotter and Bernard Weiner.

Locus of control refers to an individual's generalized expectancy about whether or not he has control over what happens to him. This concept grew from Rotter's (1954) Social Learning Theory and now is primarily sustained by correlation research that contrasts people who are "internal" (people who feel they have some control over events) with individuals who are "external" (people who feel events control them) in locus of control (Weiner, 1976).

"Attribution theory is concerned with the process by which people make judgments as to the cause of another person's behavior" (McFillen & New, 1979, p. 793). Because supervisors are called upon in the course of

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their jobs to direct employees and assess their work, attribution theory and locus of control have become of major importance to the study of supervisor-employee relations. The purpose of this study was to further support and extend the findings and social learning theories of Heider, Rotter and Weiner. These theories suggest that supervisor locus of control and attributions affect employee job performance in the work place. These two theories were applied to study the following general problems.

First, how does a supervisor behave toward an employee given how an employee performs in the work place? Secondly, how will a supervisor's locus of control (internal vs. external) influence his behavior toward an employee?

Subjects

The subjects for this study consisted of one hundred and sixty adults enrolled in undergraduate and graduate education courses at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. All subjects completed the Rotter Internal-External Locus of Control Scale. The subjects' performance on the Rotter Scale was rank ordered from highest to lowest with the upper one-third of the subjects (n=80) classified as external and the lower one-third (n=80) identified as internals. The statistical analysis performed to differentiate the two groups confirmed a significant difference in their locus of control ($t = -24.62$, $p < .05$). Subject selection into treatment conditions was made randomly via a table of random numbers. Twenty subjects were selected for each cell.

Procedure

The experimental task consisted of subjects completing questions related to demographics and Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale. A written simulation containing information about four employees along with a Likert Scale pertaining to the simulation was used for the

treatment. The employees in the simulation differed significantly in how they performed their jobs. Each one of the simulations (case studies) contained information about an employee with either perceived high work performance and high effort expenditure; one contained information about an employee with perceived low work performance and high effort expenditure; one with high performance and low effort expenditure; and the last depicted an employee with low performance and low effort expenditure. Thus, the three independent variables that were represented in the simulation were 1) locus of control (internal versus external), 2) performance (high performance versus low performance), and 3) effort expenditure (high effort expenditure versus low effort expenditure). The Likert Scales in the treatment represented subjects' attributions, these being: 1) ability, 2) effort, 3) task difficulty and 4) luck. In the additional three scales used in the treatment, subjects were asked to indicate: 5) future expectancy of employees success on a similar task, 6) increased performance and 7) amount of reward. Thus each one of the Likert Scales represented a dependent variable.

Each subject was also asked to complete a post experimental questionnaire. The experimental design consisted of a 2 x 2 x 2 multivariate analysis of covariance, with the subjects' length of work experience used as the covariate. The SPSS computer program was used to perform the statistical analysis.

Results and Conclusions

The statistical findings did not support the first problem addressed in this research. The outcome of the study indicated that a supervisor's locus of control (internal versus external) did not significantly influence his behavior toward an employee.

However, problem two was supported by the research. Most of the findings in this area were statistically significant. It was determined that a supervisor's behavior will vary toward an employee, given how an employee performs in the work place.

The results of the study found that an employee who demonstrates high performance and high effort expenditure, was rewarded more than an employee who exhibited high performance and low effort expenditure. A high performing, high effort expenditure employee would be expected to have future success at another task of this kind, as well as increased performance on future assignments. A high performing, low effort employee who successfully completed a task also received rewards, but they would not be as great as those received by the employee who exhibited both high performance and high effort expenditure. On the other hand an employee who exhibited high effort and low performance, and who failed at a task, also received some reward.

The literature indicates that people who are perceived as less able and try, receive more rewards than an able person who does not try and fails at a task. A person who displays low performance and low effort, will receive the least reward, and will not be expected to perform successfully on future tasks. Thus a supervisor will vary their behavior toward an employee given how that employee performs in the organization.

The findings of this study are consistent with the research done in attribution and achievement theory.

TABLE 1

Summary Table for Multivariate and Univariate Significance Tests

Source	Multivariate F	Univariate F						
		S1 Ability	S2 Effort	S3 Task Difficulty	S4 Luck	S5 Future Success on Future Assignments	S6 Increased Performance	S7 Reward
Locus of Control (L)	4.386***	.231	1.142	.761	17.484***	1.197	3.251	8.963*
Performance (P)	58.448**	26.632***	12.810***	9.839*	3.412	256.672**	196.903**	292.591**
Effort Expenditure (E)	31.499**	20.327***	33.514***	7.337**	1.239	86.266***	116.738***	175.314***
L X P	.976	.711	.015	2.208	1.265	2.444	1.588	.468
L X E	1.355	1.723	1.246	1.011	.167	.057	1.001	.152
P X E	8.518***	17.101***	10.812***	4.293*	16.660***	4.391*	5.610*	4.595*
L X P X E	1.217	.482	.161	.014	1.350	1.264	1.074	6.550*

df = 1,152
n = 160 (20 per cell)

* P`.05
** P`.01
*** P`.001

SUMMARY HANDOUT

- Locus of Control -
  Locus of control is a subset of attribution theory. It refers to whether or not individuals perceive that they have or have not the power to control the things that happen to them. Julian Rotter developed an instrument called the Internal-External Locus of Control Scale which measures a person's locus of control.

- Attribution Theory -
  Attribution theory is concerned with the process by which people make judgements as to the causes of another person's behavior.

- Using the Attribution Theory Weiner and his associates developed a two dimensional model to measure achievement behavior. One of the dimensions of the model is composed of four causal elements (ability, effort, task difficulty and luck). The second dimension is locus of control (internal vs. external). In the model the four causal elements are classified in the following way. Ability is stable and internal; effort is unstable and internal; task difficulty is stable and external; and luck is unstable and external.

- The researchers most associated with the development of locus of control are Fritz Heider and Julian Rotter.

- Bernard Weiner and his associates did extensive work in the area of attribution theory.

- A brief summary of the theories and research used to support this study indicate:

  - Success is rewarded more than failure, high effort is rewarded more than low effort and low ability is rewarded more than high ability.
  - People tend to attribute success to more internal factors and failure to external (or unstable factors).
  - People high in achievement motivation view effort as a major factor in determining outcome, while people low in achievement motivation believe task outcome is not highly related to effort, but more to ability.

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